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AUTHOR Bonissone, Paola; Rougle, Eija; Langer, Judith
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ABSTRACT

A study focused on ways in which literature might be used to support the literacy learning of English language learners in classrooms of diversity where a number of cultures and mother tongues were represented. The framework guiding the study (as in earlier work) is based on a sociocognitive view on literacy where literacy learning is socially based and cognition grows out of those socially based experiences. One researcher worked with a preschool teacher and another with an adult education teacher. The "field" researchers "lived" in the classroom continually planning and debriefing and revising each day's plans with the teachers. Data were gathered by performing ongoing analyses and making constant comparisons of classes in action. Data were first examined for emerging patterns. In the day care center, stories and the verbal interactions around them became the focus. Storytelling, performing, and sharing stories in a story circle appeared as a daily routine, and a literature- and literacy-rich environment was created. In the adult English as a Second Language class, 20 students took part in the project to tap their cultural and linguistic resources. The students decided to write a book of stories, with multiple drafts and drawings. From a prototypical student it was learned that a broad-based writing activity can tap students' rich cultural and experiential knowledge while engaging them in a meaningful, rich literacy environment and that interweaving oral and written texts assisted students in literacy activity. (Contains 15 references.) (NKA)

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PAOLA BONISSONE
EIJA ROUGLE
JUDITH LANGER

CELA RESEARCH REPORT NUMBER 11008

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ENGLISH LEARNING & ACHIEVEMENT

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National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement
University at Albany
State University of New York
1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222

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National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement

University at Albany, School of Education, B-9
1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222
http://cela.albany.edu
518-442-5026

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BACKGROUND

The study reported here is an extension of our earlier work on literary understanding via literature instruction (Langer, 1991a). During our first five-year project, we saw that literature can be a particularly inviting way for students to reflect on their lives, their learning and their language—i.e. to engage in literate activity. That project is described most extensively in the book, *Envisioning Literature* (Langer, 1995). Subsequently, through our work at the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (formerly the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning), we have been working collaboratively with teachers and students in a variety of school settings to learn ways in which we can help students use their own culturally and linguistically relevant literature as a way to help them gain access to literacy in English.

In a second, follow-up study, for two years we worked collaboratively with bilingual and ESL teachers to test some of the principles and ideas we learned as a result of the first study and, going beyond, to see ways in which literature could foster literacy in classrooms where the students' mother tongue was Spanish. We found that an in-depth focus on their own 'tales from home' not only put the students in a position of ownership for the stories they developed, but also helped them reflect on and learn to gain control of the content, language, structure, and surface features of their work; it helped them gain literacy (Langer, 1997).

Our third study, the one reported in this paper, focused on ways in which literature might also be used to support the literacy learning of English Language Learners in classrooms of diversity; classrooms where a number of cultures and mother tongues were represented. We considered this of great importance due to the rapidly growing multicultural representation in classrooms across the country.

The Literacy through Literature Study

We know that many classes in the United States today are filled with students from many parts of the world, representing many cultures and speaking many languages. We wanted to see how what we had learned from our earlier two studies could help develop literacy through literature instruction in classrooms of linguistic and cultural diversity. The framework that guided our work, as it had our earlier work, is based on a sociocognitive view on literacy (Langer, 1987, 1991b; Vygotsky, 1986) where literacy learning is socially based, and cognition (ways of thinking) grows out of those socially based experiences (Langer, 1991b). We used three concepts from our earlier work to guide us:

- An 'envisionment-building community' (Langer, 1995) is a classroom in which thought-provoking oral and written literacy activities pervade the context and provide a social setting for literacy learning. Through the community's sharing of ideas and disagreements and of considering multiple perspectives, students (as well as the teacher) provide each other with essential scaffolding for their literate behavior and understandings.

- The use of activity theory (Leont'ev, 1981) in the classroom, which postulates that human activity grows from real motives; and that learning takes place when students are engaged in activities where their actions are guided by conscious goals. With the help of others, they learn particular skills and operations within the context of achieving their goals. In a literacy event, students have reason to acquire and use new knowledge if it will lead them to achieve a goal involving reading and writing that they wish to complete.

- Literature is used as an avenue to literacy (Bruner, 1986), and can be a powerful way for English Language Learners to find richness in their own tales, to use them as a point of contact with others, and to learn to inspect and rework their own stories to make them more understandable to others.

We entered the sites inspired by the above mentioned theoretical assumptions, which can be connected at a deep conceptual level. An envisionment-building community is formed and shaped during goal-oriented joint activity that unite all members of the community, in our case, students, teachers, and researchers. Literature, as the area of knowledge most relevant to human experience, was intentionally used as a conducive domain for literacy learning and language acquisition, and its use resulted in the literacy development of the learners involved. These three theoretical underpinnings interweave to develop a working classroom that is built on sharing and

learning of language, literacy, and content through social interactions. The content of the activity we undertook centered around literature and involved multiple understandings and interpretations of textual worlds with the view to achieving a written narrative that others could read and understand. These personal narratives took different shapes depending on the age, cultural, and life experiences of the learners. We worked with students of many ages—preschool children, middle school students, and adults. In this report, we discuss how the concepts outlined above took shape at two settings—a day care center and at an adult learning center.

Since personal narratives naturally tap who we are and the ways in which we understand, express, and interact with the world around us, such stories are close-to-hand and thus often more easily told than other genres. They also often tap emotions, actions, and experiences that cut across cultures. In our study, the students' stories helped them utilize their cultural knowledge to make sense, unleashing their desire to find meaning in their own stories as well as in the narratives of others.

The broad-based activity took on various forms in these two sites. In the adult ESL site, students and their teacher decided to write a publishable book of stories. In the day care center, the creating of stories and the verbal interactions around those stories grew out of the existing classroom life. Literacy actions and interactions around stories developed within the frame of the larger literary activity; that is, students learned how to construct a story by asking questions about their own works and the narratives of the others. The younger learners were remarkable for their gradual mastering of the roles both of performers of and listeners to oral stories, activities that came to permeate the daily classroom life. In both sites, the underpinnings of an envisionment-building community were the shared conversations around narratives, the discussion of multiple perspectives, and the construction of individual's understandings.

The authors of this article formed a team with Judith Langer acting as project director and cross-site researcher, and Paola Bonissone and Eija Rougle as field researchers. Paola and Eija each worked with one teacher: Eija in a preschool and Paola in an adult education program. Each studied one class as a case, and targeted particular students within that class as cases within a case. The field researchers "lived" in the classrooms—not merely as observers, but as collaborators—continually planning and debriefing and revising each day's plans with the teachers.

As in our previous projects, the three of us met often with the teachers in a full project team 'institute' where we discussed the earlier studies and other related research. At the institute, we all also were readers ourselves, as we reflected on our own readings and wrote our own 'tales from home.' Together with the teachers, we also discussed what was happening in each class and brain-stormed and planned together. The teachers were trying to provide rich literacy contexts for their students, and we studied how that happened.

Besides these 'institute' meetings, the three of us met weekly for two and a half hour sessions, during which we discussed each case. All these meetings were recorded. The data collected included extensive fieldnotes and observations; transcribed classroom recordings and discussions; classroom videotapings; multiple drafts of students' stories; students' drawn pictures; and photographs as well as student and teacher interviews.

We performed on-going analyses, making constant comparisons of classes in action, focusing on stories and students' evolving literacy skills. We examined these data for emerging patterns. After completing the field work as well as the in-process analysis, we re-examined all the data against the already established patterns. We then modified or confirmed these patterns and used them to inspect the data across the sites over time.

In the following section, we present a brief case study of each site followed by some comments about what we learned.

CASE 1: LITERACY LEARNING IN A MULTICULTURAL DAY CARE CENTER*

The Community

A Northeastern urban preschool, here called New Hope Day Care Center, was located in a semi-residential environment. The Center was housed in a church annex on the fringes of the downtown area. Across the street from the playground were rows of public housing where some of the families whose children attended New Hope Day Care lived. New Hope Day Care was a publicly subsidized, multicultural, and multilingual center. The developmental program emphasized fostering children's imagination and creativity by engaging them in singing,

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* The field research and author of this section is Eija Rougle.

participating in music and doing art projects. Nursery rhymes, looking at books and listening to stories read by the teachers were part of the daily program. Both the staff and the children came from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Photo 1: **Foster grandpa Ivan, Shaquan and Levar looking at a picture book.**

Some European-American families had lived in the area for generations. Other families, many of whom were of Hispanic origin, had moved in later. Among the newcomers were also recent immigrants from Asia. Many parents were economically and educationally disenfranchised, struggling to improve their lives. The neighborhood was culturally diverse; there was an element of stability but also transiency in the community.

About 20 children between two and a half and five years old attended the center during the six month duration of the project. In addition to being multicultural, the center was also multi-generational: sometimes older siblings spent afternoons there, and two sets of foster grand-parents, a couple from Russia and another from the Ukraine, regularly joined the daily activities.

Project Goal and Activities

When we considered the larger project goal of supporting literacy through literature for these very young children, stories and the verbal interactions around them became the focus of our

collaboration with the center staff. As a field researcher I started on-going discussions with the teachers about ways of interacting with books and stories while I participated in the daily activities. The literacy activity that was broad enough to invite both children and adults to join in was storytelling. The idea of children themselves becoming story makers, creators of realities through stories, and sharing those tales with an audience was an extension of the Center's previous notions of children's literacy learning. To enact this idea, a literature and literacy rich environment was created. New books were brought in and new ways of interacting with books was initiated. Children's talk was encouraged and stretched into storying (Wells, 1986), making impromptu meaning with words.

Storytelling, performing, and sharing stories in a story circle appeared as a daily routine. Stories, "imaginary worlds of words" (Dyson, 1993), started to permeate the daily life of New Hope Day Care.

Entering into Imaginary Worlds

Photo 2: Amina, the teacher, reading to a group of children.

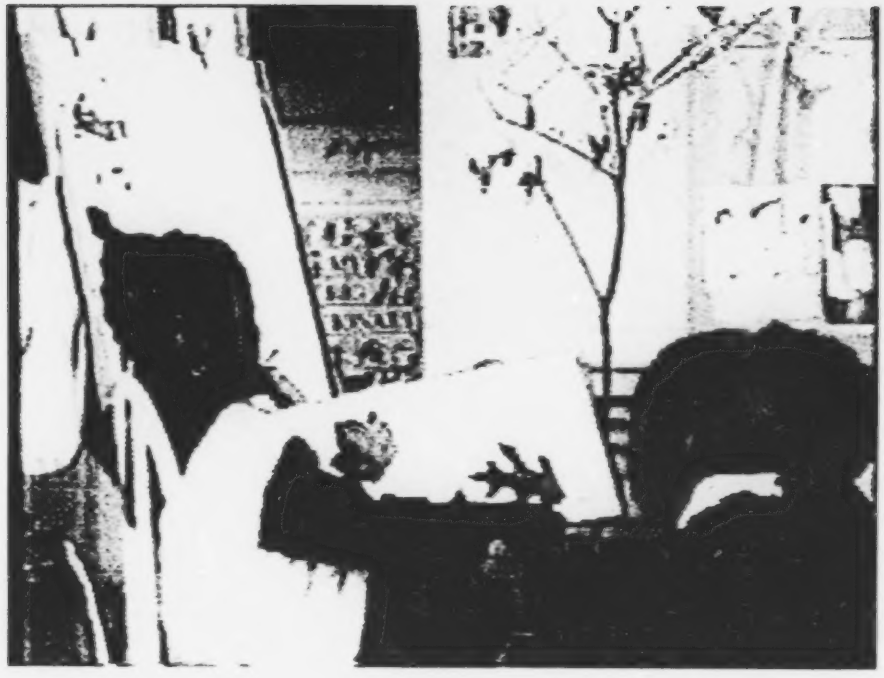

Photo 3: Ronasia reading to her friends.

As the project proceeded, teachers gradually changed the way they interacted with books and communicated with children. They started to intentionally pull children into the worlds created by words. By reading books more frequently and inviting children's comments and welcoming their questions, the adults familiarized children with stories and behaviors around books. Children were drawn into the story world. In so doing, children began on their own volition to imitate the way a teacher would read aloud. For example, at about three months into the project, Ronasia took upon herself a teacher's role; like a teacher she was sitting on an adult chair displaying the book to her friends and mimicking her "reading" voice, which was calm, clear, and had descending intonation at the end of the sentences (see Photo 3). As a reader, Ronasia did not point and name pictures, which had been a typical way of interacting with a book at the beginning of the project. Instead she used extended language—sentences—to tell the story as it appeared to her on the page.

Children had numerous opportunities with many adults to engage in reading and talking about books. In addition to listening to stories, children acted them out during imaginary play or simply became a character in a song or a nursery rhyme. Making things from Lego® blocks,

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drawing and painting were yet other ways to symbolize ideas. The five-year-olds, especially, used their drawings as stepping stones for storying.

Creating Imaginary Worlds for Others

Photo 4: A carpenter talking about making things with his hands.

Photo 5: Abiodun telling a story about his dog "Chou-Chou."

Children heard and listened to many stories from me, from the teachers, even from visitors. Parents were also invited to tell stories at the center. A family evening was organized, with storytelling and discussion about the importance of stories. In fact, children were inundated with stories; they listened to stories being read, and told by the adults. They had frequent opportunities to enter the imaginary worlds of books and create stories of their own through dramatic play, drawing, storying and performing their own stories in the story circle.

Student Case Study: Joseph, an Emerging Storyteller

I now shift focus from looking at the group of children to discussing one child's attempts of entering into "imaginary worlds of words" (Dyson, 1993) and in creating imaginary worlds and sharing them with others.

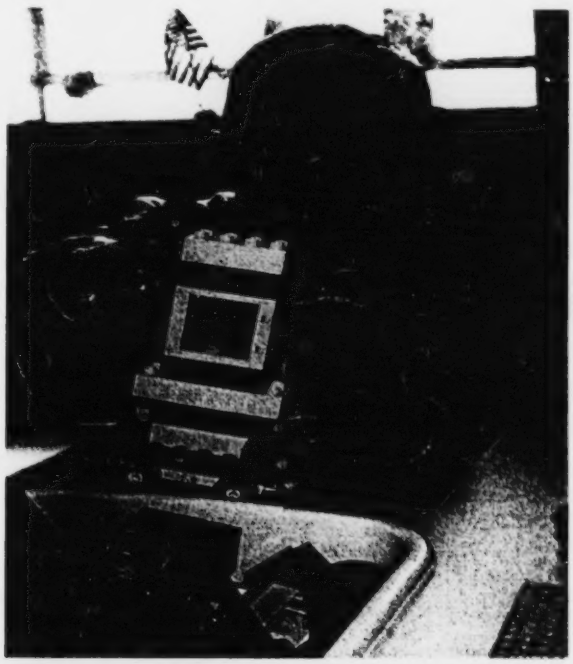

Photo 6: Joseph building and storying at a Lego® table.

Joseph was three years old when he entered New Hope Day Care Center. His parents had moved recently from India. Joseph did not communicate with words at all when he started at the center. At home the family spoke Malayalam, their native language. Joseph's parents were highly educated, speaking several languages, among them English. The father told me that at home Joseph "gets into everything. I have to watch him all the time." At the center, Joseph was also very active and inquisitive.

Joseph developed and showed a keen interest in cars and cameras. Within a few weeks, the adults were often able to engage in dialogues with him, first about a new toy or boots he had with him, then about cars and cameras Joseph built with Lego® blocks. Joseph enjoyed examining my video equipment and camera. During the play he often used storying, saying words and sentences

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in English and strings of utterances as explanations of what he was seeing and doing. I have many transcripts of Joseph's talk during play with cars and garages. Later on, Joseph's ideas and words played out repeatedly during these dialogues and became topics for his stories.

When Joseph was interacting with a book, at first, he would leaf through it, turning pages back and forth, without any verbal commentary. Later on when sitting with an open picture book, he would start voicing aloud. Joseph was storying, making sense of the pictures, telling a story to himself. Here is the way Joseph was entering the story world of *One Cow Coughs*, a counting book (Loomis & Dypold, 1994).

> (Unclear) (unclear) No hands. Take here.
> He says: (unclear) (unclear). He said: Mew kemut, mew (unclear)
> and the duck and the duck.
> [turning the page]
> Kemal said: mew. Duck say: quack, quack.
> That's it. Dorby, dorby.
> Duck said: quack, quack, quack, quack, duck . . . that's a page.
> [Transcript 3/1/95]

When listening to Joseph voicing the story, one got a feeling of "reading." His utterances flowed, and had a prosody of book reading. He was not just pointing and labeling pictures on the pages. He created his own words, such as "kemal," to express and bridge his meaning. Like the other children, Joseph also spent a lot of time observing, looking at and listening to both adults and children as they engaged in literacy activities.

Joseph in the Story Circle

The story circle had become a conducive context for literacy learning at the Center, where it was a daily activity. Usually, after an active hour of music, singing and exercising, children were guided into relaxing and dreaming. The lights were dimmed as a candle was placed in the middle of the circle. Initially, teachers shared their stories. Later, a teacher would simply ask: "Who wants to tell a story?" The children's first efforts were often silent—their lips would move as if telling a story, and after a while the storyteller would pronounce, loudly, "THE END." Soon, however, the students began use voices loud enough for their stories to be heard.

Photo 7: Joseph telling a story about his car.

It wasn't until the end of our project that Joseph, now three and a half years old, emerged as a storyteller. As children and the adults were sitting in a story circle, Joseph said: "I have a story." He went on, "It's about my car." As he was performing, his posture was that of a storyteller; his body was raised, he was on his knees with his hands resting on his lap. Joseph was looking up to the audience, adults and children, who were sitting on the floor. His voice was calm, and he spoke the words with elongation. Some strings of words were not discernible to the audience; however, the even the undiscernible words had inflection and carried a feeling of a story. Joseph said: "My car [unclear words] no wheels, [unclear words] no wheels, no engine . . . no engine no air bag . . ." Then, he lifted his hands onto his waist as if to give emphasis to the conclusion "That's it," he said. Joseph's first, shared story lasted one minute.

Findings

Joseph was only one of the twenty children at the New Hope Day Care Center. What we learned, we learned from all the children. The following three axioms, my conclusions, are based on an analysis of all the research data.

Literate behavior: Social praxis. Very young children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are able to engage in the social practice of storytelling: to take upon the roles of a performer and that of a member of an audience. The young children showed audience awareness, listening and directing their attention to the speaker. As performers, they took upon a posture and a voice/intonation of a storyteller. They learned to keep the floor and audience's attention. As they were performing their stories, the stories had flow and fluency. Stories emerged in and through the social practice, in interaction with others, adults and peers.

Story: Vehicle for literary conventions. Stories performed in the story circle can be viewed as literacy and literary artifacts. They were publicly shared and received, reflected upon and enjoyed. Children learned to create a content, entertain a topic and cast it in a shape of a story with a beginning, middle and end. They learned to incorporate literary conventions (Applebee, 1978), such as formulaic beginnings and endings in their stories. These formulas were used in idiosyncratic ways. "Once upon a time" or "Once uponse a time" were examples of the formula to begin the story. For the endings, children used: "The end," "That's the end," "That's it," "Finished," and "They lived happily ever after." Interestingly, children would mark out loud the ending of their story, even before they articulate the story with their voice.

Storytelling: Invitation to decontextualized language use and metalanguage. Children developed decontextualized language skills—i.e. they "used language to create fantasy worlds and convey information to relative strangers" (Snow, 1991, p.7). Children learned to take information, segment it and cast in a symbolic form—language. They used metalanguage to talk about their own storytelling, using mental state verbs such as to make a story, to think, and to tell. In doing so they could better control and plan their own actions. Use of language in this way may be an important link to future literacy learning (Snow, 1991).

CASE 2: LITERACY THROUGH LITERATURE IN AN ADULT LITERACY CLASS*

The Community

At the other end of the age spectrum, we were also collaborating with an adult English as a Second Language (ESL) class and its instructor. The site was a state funded program for economically and educationally disadvantaged adults, located in an urban Northeastern city. The school offered literacy and job training courses as well as English language classes for non-native speakers. The school, which was housed in a commercial area of the city, had an open enrollment policy. We were collaborating with students and an ESL teacher.

Twenty students took part in the project, the maximum number permitted in this class according to the school's guidelines. However, because of the school's open enrollment policy, students came and went throughout the year. Sometimes they moved on to other classes; other times they left the center for personal reasons. This changed the constellation of the class, but the focal students for this case study remained throughout most of the project's life. There was a range of ages; the youngest student was twenty years old, with a number of students in their mid-fifties. The class was also educationally diverse, with the most formally educated student having completed high school in her native country and the least, having completed up to the third grade. The length of U.S. residency varied as well, with the most recent arrival having been in the U.S. only four months and the longest resident having been in the States for 40 years. The group was multilingual and multicultural. There were eight different languages represented from eleven different countries. The common language for the group was English.

Project Goal and Activities

The project's goal was to tap the students' cultural and linguistic resources as they used and fine tuned their literacy skills in their first language while learning English and literacy skills in their new language. Initially, the instructor and I engaged the students in a discussion about what

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* The field research and author of this section is Paola Bonissone.

they might produce as a final product for this activity. The students decided to write a book of stories. The shape and content of the book developed over the course of the project as stories slowly became the classroom culture and life.

Once we knew that the students wanted to write their own book of stories, we collaboratively planned a series of activities for them. The specific daily tasks developed out of the learners' needs as they became involved in the broad writing activity. Initially, we exposed all the students to different stories and genre types through readings done in class. This was done with the purpose of stimulating ideas while providing examples for their own writing. The class also read and discussed our previous project's book, *Tales from Home* (NRCLTL, 1994). The interactions with all these texts modeled patterns that could later be used by the students when they would work with each other's stories. As their own stories began entering the classroom activity, the work revolved around oral story sharing and readings of the students' written works in progress. Sometimes this was done together as a class; other times in smaller groups.

The students shared their stories together asking each other questions, clarifying their ideas and working through meanings as they worked on the content, form and language of the stories. Even though the students came from a variety of cultures and backgrounds, the human connection was made through this oral story sharing and through the readings.

Multiple drafts were made and shared. Students often went through series of drafts as they extended their plots and added details based on comments and questions from their classmates. These copies were placed on the classroom wall so that new students to the community could understand the activity and immediately become part of the story writing activity. Some students wrote up to ten drafts of their stories. Eventually the computer was used. Many students learned how to use a computer as they wrote and reworked their multiple drafts.

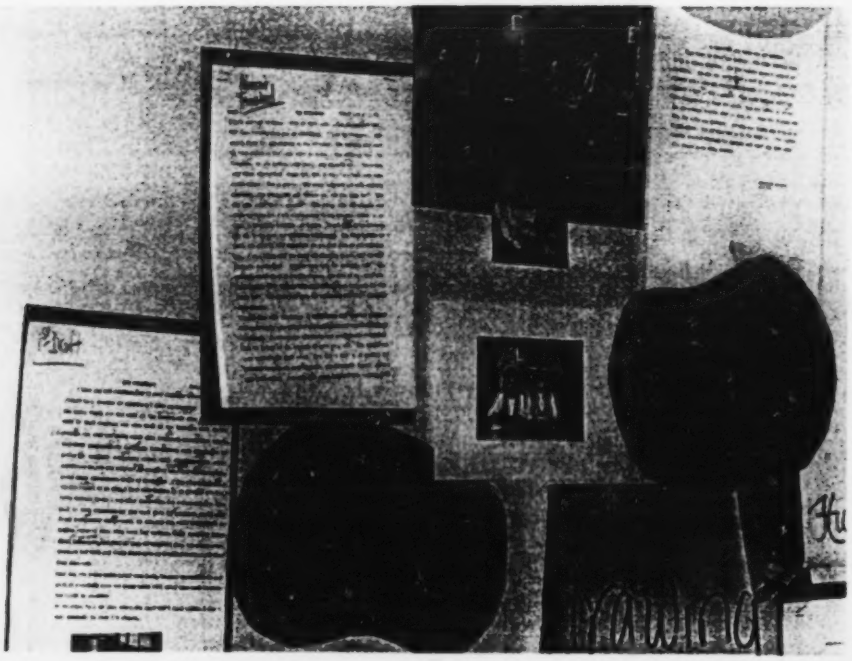

Photo 1: The classroom wall of multiple drafts.

Student Case Study: Shakeelah's *Jungle Woman*

One of the many students representative of the educational, linguistic and cultural diversity in this classroom was Shakeelah, a 25-year-old mother of five children. Shakeelah was an Afghani refugee who had been in the program for three months prior to the beginning of this project. She had studied in Afghanistan until the age of eight. This was her first time in an American classroom. Unlike the 16 students who immediately gave permission for us to examine their work while taking part in this project, Shakeelah was one of two students who were initially reluctant. Within a month, however, she appeared after class with her brother to ask if she could be a part of the project. Her brother spoke for her as she nodded and remained silent. That moment was an important one for Shakeelah and the project. From then on she became an active participant in the classroom activity and discussions.

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Photo 2: Shakeelah (woman with scarf on right) and her group members working on *Jungle Woman*.

Prior to the project, Shakeelah never spoke in class either in her native Pushtu or in English. Once she decided to join and granted permission, Shakeelah became a pivotal player in the activity. In fact her story, *Jungle Woman*, was the first story to be brought in to share with the class. It was first brought as an oral story during story sharing time, as transcribed below.

Shakeelah: Yeah. Sometime funny sometime really story like she look really story. An sometime no really story. One day . . . a scare story

Researcher: A scary story. . . . She told you a scary story . . . Do you remember it?

Shakeelah: Yes, yes. This story my grandma tell me. My grandma say, "One day I'm no old this time. I am go outside. I come back home and the somebody water back

Researcher: Put water on my back

Shakeelah: Yes. I'm look. Nobody here. I come home stay and the night time I sleep the bed. No like sleep just

Researcher: rest

Shakeelah: yeah. I see you black lady come the room. She come sit the room here and sleep here. She said, "Who's this?"

Researcher: (whispers) She doesn't say anything.

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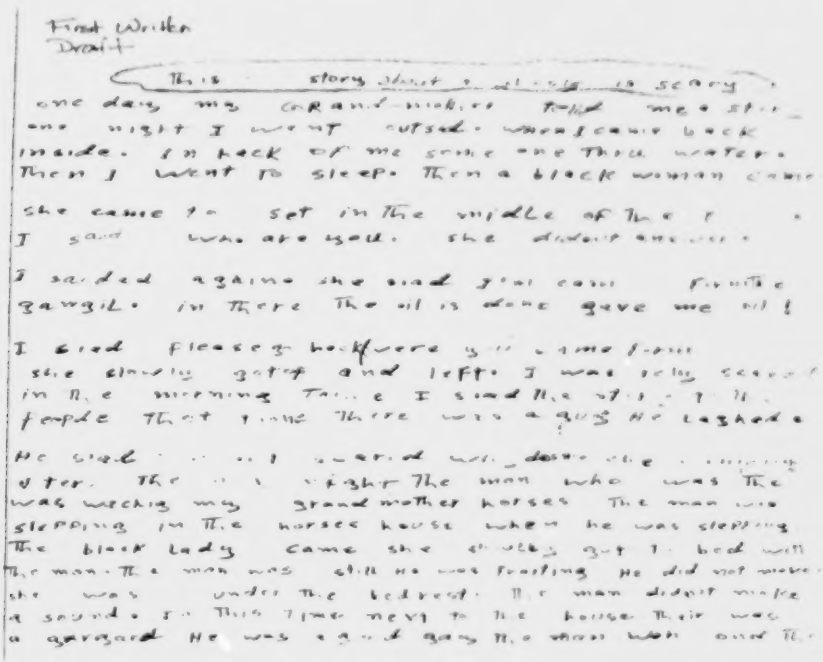
Shakeelah: And I say, "who's this?" (Forcefully) I am coming from the jungle. My oil finish. Give me oil. (dramatically with voice trembling) I'm scared [ok]. and I say, (in monotone voice) "Please go back. Please go back." She stay and say, "Please go back and, go back the jungle." And she get up she go back. The morning time I'm story for people "last night I'm sleep and the woman came and said," one guy, my grandma tell me and one guy he my horse give water and the other food . . . I don't know what the name? (transcript 2/1/95)

In the last part of the transcript we see Shakeelah utilizing her voice to convey her story's meaning to her listeners. The activity allowed her to tap her cultural experiences. She had recounted how, as a refugee when living in Pakistan, women often told stories to each other as they prepared meals. Here, we see her story telling abilities as she captures our interest about this character. This story was told to her in Pushtu as a young child by her grandmother.

After the oral story sharing sessions, Shakeelah taped her story and with help from other students, created her first hand written text (see Artifact 1). This was the first time Shakeelah had ever written anything beyond a few words, phrases, or sentences in English. Prior to this activity, writing had been kept to a minimum in this class, with students filling in worksheets or answering questions with a sentence or two.



Artifact 1: Shakeelah's first hand written draft of *Jungle Woman*. (It reads: "This story is a story about a ghosts is scary. One day my grandmother telled me a story. One night I went outsid. When I came back inside. In back of me some one thru water. Then I went to sleep...")

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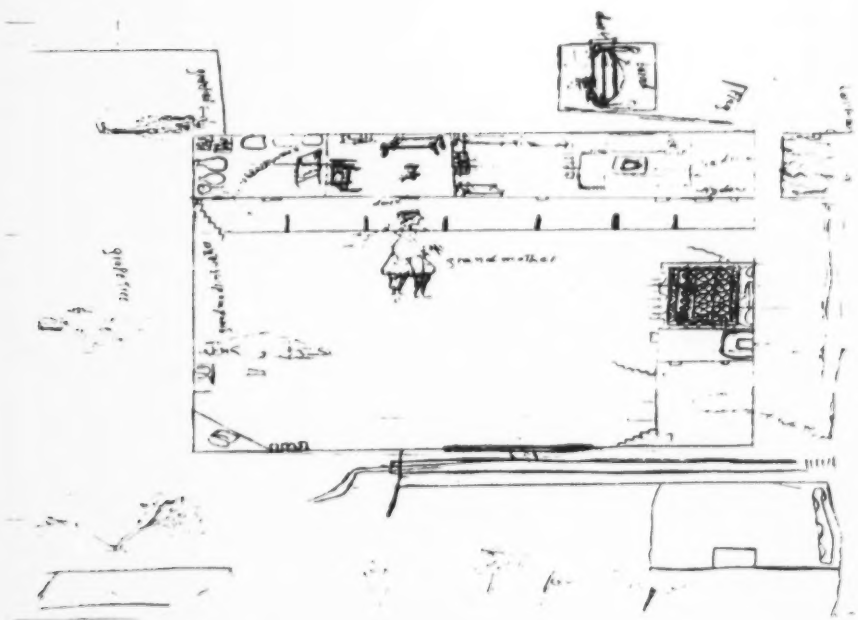
Supporting Literacy Learning via Student-Drawn Pictures

Subsequent to the hand written draft, Shakeelah drew various pictures of the story's setting and characters to use in helping her convey the story to group and class members. Through the elaborate drawing (see Artifact 2) her group members were able to understand the story's setting, her grandmother's house and the structure of that house, which she had identified as 'outside in' since the structure's interior was open to the sky much like a patio with the rooms of the home all around the exterior wall. From the pictures, Shakeelah was able to get help in extending her story and clarifying the events of the story's plot.



Artifact 2: Shakeelah's drawing for *Jungle Woman*

Shakeelah left the program a month prior to the termination of the classroom activity. Her final draft of *Jungle Woman* (Artifact 3) had been written on the computer, just as all her classmates had done.

Photo 3: The community of adult ESL learners.

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My name is Shakeelah Akbar. I am from the city of Koonar, Afganistan. This story was told to me as a young child by my grandmother.

The Jungle Woman

A long time ago my grandmother told me this story. One night she went outside into the courtyard to get some water to drink. When she came back inside she felt someone throw some water on her back. She looked around and saw no-one. She returned to bed and tried to fall back asleep but after five minutes a dirty woman with long stringy black hair, hanging over her face, came inside and sat in the middle of her bedroom. My grandmother said in a trembling voice, "who are you?" but the dark woman remained silent. Again she asked, "who are you?" The filthy woman finally answered, "I came here from the jungle. My oil is finished. Give me oil! I need oil for my hair! Give me oil!" My grandmother was puzzled and frightened and said, "Please go back where you came from." The woman slowly got up and left without saying a word. My grandmother was very scared and couldn't sleep all night. When she got up from the bed the following morning she told her family what had happened. The man in charge of the horses and barn heard her story, laughed and said, "I'm not scared. She doesn't frighten me!"

The next night the jungle woman returned. This time she went slowly to the barn where the man in charge of the horses slept. She went into the bed where the man was sleeping. The man was so frightened that he couldn't make a sound and remained ever so still. Behind my grandmother's house was a man that had been buried many years before. He had been a good and gentle man. That night this very tall man, dressed in white, came carrying a long sword to help the man in the barn. He walked over to where the jungle woman was and placed the sword over her head and said in a deep voice, "Get out from here or I'll cut you into pieces." The jungle woman got up very slowly. As she began to leave the man dressed in white said, "If you bother these people or if you come back again I will know." The jungle woman left and never returned again.

Artifact 3: The final version of Shakeelah's story.

Findings

From Shakeelah and her classmates we learned a number of things about literacy learning, literature, and the English language learner.

Tapping students' experiential and cultural knowledge. We learned that a broad-based writing activity such as this can tap students' rich cultural and experiential knowledge while engaging them in a meaningful, literacy rich environment. Literacy skills and English were learned together through oral story sharing, pictures and the written texts brought to the class and created by the class. Students utilized stories from their own languages and experiences to become involved in the literacy activity.

Interweaving of oral and written texts. The use of oral story sharing allowed the students to practice their new language skills in ways that were culturally comfortable while also engaging them in very literate ways. They learned how to tell their stories while also learning how to assist others in expanding and improving their texts. They learned how to be both a participant and a listener throughout the activity's life. We also learned that the oral story telling was a natural and important link into the story world and the written medium. The interweaving of the oral and written texts assisted the students in the literacy activity (Bakhtin, 1981). The interactions around the oral story telling and the discussions that followed, modeled language patterns that the students could use with the written texts that their classmates brought to the classroom activity and thus they could help each other in the writing of their texts.

Pictures as a literacy tool. We also learned that student-drawn pictures were more than just illustrations for the stories. They were an outgrowth of the students' stories and ideas and developed from the attempt that the students made to communicate with each other about their texts. Because a literacy rich environment had developed through story readings, oral story sharings and the students own readings of their works, a community of support and intense activity developed. The pictorial representations were an important tool that developed out of the need and desire to share with each other (Vygotsky, 1986). These pictures became a critical tool in helping students learn important language and literacy skills while also helping bridge students into the writing activity. The pictures also permitted students to better assist each other in the writing of their stories.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the obvious differences across sites, we can see the powerful role stories were able to play in helping the very diverse students find commonality and a desire to communicate with one another. The telling of stories created topics of shared experience that the students wanted to explore with each other and demonstrated difference that the students valued and worked to learn more about. The sharing and writing of stories became a time for the students to express themselves and make contact with others. It became a catalyst for oral and written language use. Further, because the students spoke a number of languages, English became the shared language of discourse. Thus, as they participated in the class experiences, the students found increasing need as well as opportunity to use and learn English, language and literacy.

Further, we learned that for the pre schoolers as well as adults, art work (drawing of all students) became an important literacy 'tool' permitting the students to present the complex thoughts they worked to convey in their stories even before they had the shared English language facility to do so. And these pictures then became a jumping off place for the teachers—a ready set of topics and concepts to force language and literacy instruction.

Because the story telling activity provided social as well as personal motives for the students to gain facility with language and literacy, it became an impetus for them to 'keep at it' and in doing so, to further develop their language and literacy abilities. They became a literary community of co-workers, finding common ground across diversity.

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Janet Angelis, Associate Director
Center on English Learning & Achievement
University at Albany, State University of New York
1400 Washington Ave., ED, B-9
Albany, NY 12222 (518) 442-5023
jangelis@cnsvax.albany.edu